EPIC OF THE SHATTERED BRICKS

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Chapter I. Mobilization

At the end of 1971, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam issued a mobilization order to reinforce the army for the Easter Offensive. Tri[1], Binh[2] and Hung[3] are students of Hanoi University of Science and Technology in the Faculty of Economics, all of whom accepted to put away their pens, wear the green soldier uniforms and took up arms to protect the Fatherland, along with many other students from all over the North.

Tri went home and told his mother that he would submit his application. His mother tried to dissuade him, but Tri replied:

- It's a mobilization order of the State, all my friends will go, how can I not go?

The mother looked sad and replied in a low voice:

- Fine, I will prepare for you, and remember to ask for more information about your father's situtation. He left in '68 and there's still no news. Remember to frequently send me letters!

- Yes, mom! - His smile tried to cover his emotion.

In the same village as Tri, there was a pretty girl named Linh. Her family was poor so she stayed at home to help her mother with business. She was 2 years younger than Tri. When she received the news that he was about to join the army, she burst into tears and hugged Tri tightly. He comforted her with a choked voice:

- I go and then I will come back. There's one thing I haven't dared to say yet, only when I return will I tell you. I’m sure I’ll come back!

Linh sobbed:

- I will wait for you, no matter how long it takes!

The two hugged each other for a long time, on the verge of separation. Linh took off and gave him the hairpin she often used. Tri held that keepsake tightly and then went home as her mother was packing his things. His mother asked:

- When will you leave?

- Tomorrow, the training will start, after about two months will we go to the South for reinforcement. When I leave will I know where I go, which battalion,...

- Then you should rest, you will have to wake up early tomorrow morning!

The next morning, both Tri's mother and Linh came to see him off. Binh and Hung were already waiting at the village communal house. Tri laughed and shouted his friend's name. Hung leaned over to Tri's ear, his eyes mischievous:

- You have a hot girl to see you off, hold on tight! - The group burst out laughing, then headed to the central training camp.

When they arrived, they saw nearly two hundred people in familiar green uniforms. As soon as they sat down, a man with a stern face looked at the tumultuous group of new soldiers and shouted "Soldiers, pay attention!!". Everyone immediately fell silent and automatically lined up in neat rows.

Looking at the rank, he was a Major. He walked around and then called the roll, from 1, 2,... to 22, a repeatedly yawning soldier. The whole crowd turned to look and shouted "23, 23, hey you!". The Major glared for a while but did not say anything. His ice-cold expression was extremely scary. After calling out 202 people, the Major introduced: "My name is Tran Son[4], commander of Division 302B. I will be the one to train you all to reinforce the army to fight the enemy in the South."

The first day, they were only taught about theory, gun structure, bullet types, how to disassemble and assemble guns. The dry mechanical knowledge in the classroom now became vital. Tri, who had studied mechanics, was pretty quick at disassembling and assembling the AK, whereas Binh was clumsy and dropped the spring. Hung constantly made fun of teammates who did it wrong. However, after only a few days, the student life was completely over.

They were thrown into a cycle of iron discipline, waking up at 4:30 am, jogging long distances with backpacks full of dirt, then learning basic combat skills. Every movement had to be decisive and quick.

They had to learn how to dig individual trenches under the hot sun, lying flat on the ground full of thorns and rocks. Tri complained because his shirt was torn, and Binh kept getting cramps because he was not used to the intensity. During the first shooting practice session, pulling the trigger for real, the sound of the gun was deafening. Tri tightened his grip on the gun, remembering his mother's eyes and the hairpin. He understood that each bullet carried a matter of life and death.

This was the hardest part. Major Son asked them to practice unarmed martial arts, quick reflexes in all situations. He anticipated that the Southern battlefield would be a struggle for every meter of land, every ruined house. One day, while everyone was doing combat drills, exhausted and sore, a soldier, unable to bear it any longer, burst out: “You’re going too far! We’re not commandos to be doing this much close combat training!” The Major looked straight at him, his voice icy cold yet heavy with the weight of the battlefield: “Go say that to the Americans! They’ll give you a medal for it. The battlefield doesn’t accept the weak! Train again!”. The soldier had no choice but to continue angrily, and though no one spoke, everyone understood that this was preparation for the inevitable brutality to come.

Time flew by swiftly; in just over two short months, the frail students had completely vanished, replaced by dark-skinned, hardened soldiers with a burning resolve in their hearts to fight and defend the country.

When the appointed day to go to the South came, all three soldiers were added to Battalion 17B, commanded by comrade Nguyen Tuan Cuong at the Citadel front (Quang Tri). They boarded a train heading to southern Quang Binh, adjacent to Quang Tri. After 4 hours on the train, all three arrived. Passing through the bustling streets, approaching the edge of the forest, they were guided by an intelligence commander of the Citadel front until they reached the banks of Thach Han River.

Chapter II. Entering the Citadel

When they reached the banks of Thach Han River, the boatwomen were already prepared to take the soldiers across. They hurriedly urged them on: “Hurry up guys! The South Vietnamese troops will start shelling any moment now!”.

Thạch Hãn River, the only gateway to Quang Tri Citadel, was also the place that endured the most terrifying bombardments. Its waters were murky and churning, torn apart by relentless American and South Vietnamese shelling; the stench of gunpowder and blood blended into one, creating an unbearable smell.

The young boatwoman, barely in her twenties, had a checkered scarf tightly wrapped around her hair, her hands firmly gripped the wooden oars, her sunburnt face with glowing eyes filled with determination. On the fragile little boat sat three Uncle Ho’s soldiers and more than a dozen fresh recruits new to the battlefield sitting close together, pounding with both excitement and fear.

As the boat reached mid-river, Binh timidly asked the boatwoman: “Sister, why are the waves so strong? There’s no storm, is there?”. She gave a faint smile, her hands still rowing steadily: “Those aren’t waves, kid. That’s *steel waves*! Bombs are exploding beneath the river. Don’t worry, just close your eyes; when you open them, you’ll already be on the other side!”.

Suddenly, a wave of enemy artillery from Doc Mieu roared in, shrieking like tearing the sky apart. Two shells exploded right beside the boat. River water and mud burst violently into the air as the boat was thrown upward, rocking wildly as if it were about to capsize.

A cry rang out. A soldier, carrying an ammunition crate, was struck in the shoulder by shrapnel. Another person quickly helped him up. Hung asked anxiously: “Sister, there’s too much shelling! Will the boat stay afloat?”. Though shells whistled past her ears, the boatwoman gripped the oars tightly and answered firmly: “This boat’s made of ironwood, which is very tough! Just stay still, and keep that crate safe! Come on, we’re almost there!”.

Amid the rain of bullets, a soldier named Hung[5] was shot in the chest. He collapsed, only managing to whisper “Mother…” before his body slipped beneath the raging current. Hưng was about to leap in to save him, but Trí quickly stopped him, because if they hesitated, the entire boat and everyone on it would become sitting targets. The soldier carrying the ammunition crate, though gravely injured, gritted his teeth and held on with all his strength to keep it from falling into the water. He whispered to the others: “Leave me alone, just protect the ammo crate! The Citadel is waiting for us!”

The boatwoman fought back her tears, rowing harder. She poured every ounce of strength into each stroke, driving the boat through the smoke and fire. As soon as they reached the bank, the soldiers hurried to carry the wounded soldier into the trenches. The boatwoman whispered silently to herself: “Rest in peace, comrades!”.

After Tri, Binh, Hung entered the trenches, they asked the intelligence commander where Nguyen Tuan Cuong[6], the commander of Outpost C, was.

When they arrived, dusk had already fallen. They saw a man tirelessly digging a trench with a shovel. He turned around and asked: “New recruits, huh?”. They replied: “Yes, sir. We’re all students who’ve been through training. Please teach us what we need to know!”

Cuong took out three portions of rice wrapped in banana leaves, handed them over, and said: “Here, eat some rice!”. Then, he continued: “Now, introduce yourselves!”.

Bình asked to go first:

- My name is Binh, Dang Duc Binh [7], a student at the Hanoi University of Science and Technology, Faculty of Economics. My father was a soldier who fought the French but sadly died in battle, so I carry a deep hatred for the enemy. I'm not strong or quick and lack physical power, but I make up for it by being sharp-minded, have clear plans and understand quickly.

Cường said:

- Impressive, what about you?

- My name is Tri, Nguyen Trung Minh Tri [8], fast and brave, always ready for any mission. My weakness is that I startle easily.

- Huh, going into battle and getting startled? That won't do much good. And you, the bookish-looking one?

- Ah, my name is Hung, Nguyen Viet Hung [9], got a good sense of humor. I'm agile, but I tend to lose focus easily and joke around too much.

- Alright, as for me, my name is Cuong, Nguyen Tuan Cuong, commander of Battalion 17B defending the Citadel. I'm from Bac Ninh. I was a farmer, I took up arms because of the enemy's raids. I'm affable, highly responsible when it comes to duty. My weakness is that I only studied up to fifth grade, so there's still much I don't know.

The night had settled, so Cuong led the group to their resting place. It was an old, pitch-dark room, everywhere's damp and rickety, even dirtier and more worn than at the training camp. Rats ran all over the place, which made Trí, who was afraid of insects, shiver. Cuong said: "There'll be a big enemy offensive tomorrow, get some rest tonight to regain your strength for the fight.".

Chapter III. Into the Battle

At dawn, when only a few sentries were on watch, suddenly, a barrage erupted, pounding the trenches relentlessly. Everyone rushed out, took their positions and returned fire. Both sides fought fiercely, the South Vietnamese troops charged forward aggressively, firing intensely into the trenches. Tri, Binh, Hung also took up their posts and shot down several enemy soldiers.

The South Vietnamese tanks soon joined in, fired into the trenches and caused heavy casualties. Tri quickly asked Cuong: "There are tanks, what do we use to fight them now?!". Cuong replied: "We're out of RPG-7 rounds. No matter how advanced a weapon is, it has its weak points. Aim for the gunners on top to clear the way for our suicide squad to throw anti-tank bombs!". Hearing that, the three opened fire on the gunners. A dozen men charged forward and hurled explosives at the tanks. The tanks blew up but those brave men had fallen under the enemy's gunfire.

After three hours, the South Vietnamese assault was finally repelled. The surviving soldiers hurried to carry the wounded into the infirmary and to bury the fallen. Tri stepped onto the ground and felt as if it weren’t soil at all, but the bones and blood of his comrades, a pale red mixture. Binh trembled, staring blankly at a corpse. A hole in the back of a South Vietnamese soldier exposed his lungs and spine, and inside, a swarm of rats was scurrying. Binh tried to apply all the logic he had learned as a student: “It’s just organic matter. The bullet went through soft tissue. The rats are acting on instinct.” But, the cold detachment of reason was quickly overwhelmed by the stench and the horrifying sight. He turned away, vomited violently into the trench. Hung descended into the trench and saw a corpse with a pale face, eyes wide open, blood flowing. The body was unrecognizable, arms and legs crushed, bones and marrow exposed, surrounded by pools of blood. The usually humorous soldier's throat dried up. He tried to force a joke in his mind, something exaggerated to dispel the horror, but his mind was blank. This wasn’t fighting, this was hell.

Tomorrow will be the 37th day of the battle to defend the Citadel. Cuong’s unit had just met with the frontline commanders and received word that: to gain an advantage in the Paris peace talks, South Vietnam will plant their flag on the Citadel, then photograph it to spread rumors forcing us to make concessions at the negotiating table. Cuong said: “Therefore, you’ll go out to Outpost A2 to keep watch. I will be reassigned elsewhere, you must do everything you can to prevent them from planting the flag, understand?”. The three fell silent, understanding that this would be one of Battalion 17B’s most difficult missions.

In the depths of night on the 41st, while they were on watch, they spotted a South Vietnam soldier creeping up the wall in the dark to plant the flag. Hung was about to raise his gun to shoot. Trí stopped him, saying: “Don’t fire yet, a muzzle flash will give us away, and the noise could alert his teammates on watch. Climb up, get close and bayonet him!”. Hung nodded. As Tri, Binh were preparing to rush forward, an intelligence commander called them over and ordered them to go to Cuong's position to provide support. Hung was left to face the soldier alone, one-on-one.

He climbed onto the wall and accidentally made a stone fall to the ground, making a sound. The enemy soldier turned around, drew his knife and lunged at Hung. Hung raised the butt of his gun to block the downward strike. They struggled in silence, with just heavy clashing. At that moment, a flare was shot, illuminating the South Vietnamese soldier’s face.

Hung froze. He abruptly stopped, only managing to shout "Hoang Gia Minh[10]...?". The South Vietnamese soldier froze too, eyes wide: “Hung?”. In that single moment of hesitation, the enemy found his footing and

shoved Hung against the wall. Life and death, hung by a thread. Hung remembered the wounded soldier's words on Thach Han River: “Protect the ammo crate! The Citadel is waiting for us!”. He gritted his teeth, all his humor and lack of focus vanished, leaving only hatred and duty.

He pushed the enemy away and lunged his bayonet into the soldier’s abdomen, making him grunt, "*hự*", and collapsed. Hung kicked his face, sending him tumbling down the two-meter-high wall. The South Vietnamese soldier’s teammates, hearing the commotion, opened fire toward Hung’s position. Fortunately, he managed to take cover in time and remained unharmed.

Under the blurry moonlight, Hung looked down. His old friend, Hoang Gia Minh, lay there with the rolled-up flag in his hand. Hung whispered, his voice hoarse: “You’re filthier than even the South Vietnamese, Hoang Gia Minh…”. After saying that, he turned and walked away, too drained even to spit. This shock hit him harder than any bullet ever could.

As for Tri and Binh, reaching Cuong required passing through a 200-meter-long tunnel. At the same time, on the opposite side, a South Vietnamese soldier was running from North Vietnamese troops. Hearing Tri and Binh’s voices, he hid around the right corner. Tri and Binh had no idea. As soon as they came around, he lunged, knocking both of their guns aside. He then kicked Binh down and punched Tri, sending both sprawling. Both got back up, ready to fight. The soldier struck Binh several more times, leaving him crumpled. Tri charged, the soldier quickly drew a knife, swinging it horizontally. Tri ducked, swiftly kicked the man in the leg, causing him to fall and drop the knife. Tri grabbed the knife, jumped forward, and stabbed him. Blood spurted onto Tri’s face. The blade sank deep into the soldier’s abdomen - he wouldn’t survive. Shortly after, Cuong arrived just as Binh regained consciousness. Surprised, he asked: “You two finished him off? Impressive. He was tough.”. Cuong searched for his valuables and found only papers with the name Ngo Bao Khanh[11]. Tri glanced at them, wondering: “Think I’ve heard this name somewhere before?”. He asked Binh and Hung, but neither of them knew.

Chapter IV. The Lonely Tower

La Vang - home to the ruins of the Basilica of Our Lady of La Vang devastated relentlessly by bombings, about six kilometers from the Citadel. The only remnant left standing was the ancient bell tower, covered with bullet holes and char marks - a haunting monument of destruction. The once serene sanctuary had become a desolate site scattered with bomb craters, shattered concrete and bricks, scorched and torn trees. The heavy air reeked of gunpowder and damp. Unlike the Citadel, La Vang was engulfed in an eerie silence. Only the occasional

whistle of wind or the distant hum of a reconnaissance plane broke the stillness, deepening the sense of solitude and sacred on the battlefield.

After a tense meeting at the field headquarters, Cuong returned, the battle-scorched face of the commander carried a gravity never seen before, which made the three very worried. He told Tri:

-Tri, this is a top secret mission that I completely trust you with. About two days ago, during an emergency retreat due to artillery fire, one of our task forces left behind a bag of confidential documents at a temporary base behind La Vang. It contained all the communication codes and a map of the force deployment for the upcoming period. If the South Vietnamese finds it, our army will be at a huge disadvantage on the entire front. You must go get it within three days at the latest.

Tri silently nodded, understanding that the lives of the entire battalion, and even the peace talks, could depend on this trip. Before leaving, he told his two friends that if he did not return, they should take all the things he left behind and bring them back to his mother and Linh. The two friends nodded and hoped he would return.

According to the planned route, Tri had to sneak from the Citadel, avoiding the dense guard posts to get to Thach Han River's downstream. This section of the river was still turbulent and full of flares. He had to use a small raft to get to the opposite bank, then go up the hillsides, through the forest to go to the upstream of Thach Han - a long, extremely dangerous journey because it had to go through many disputed areas and enemy-controlled areas. It was not until nearly midnight that Tri reached the La Vang area.

Under the dim moonlight covered by clouds, the La Vang Sanctuary appeared like a ghost. The lonely bell tower stood tall on the ruins of the Basilica, like a bony hand reaching up to the blue sky.

Tri was moving cautiously around the scorched coconut trees when suddenly, a noise rang out from his direction. Four South Vietnamese soldiers were patrolling the sanctuary grounds, they turned around immediately. Tri did not hesitate, rushing at full speed towards the bell tower, he heard the M16 gun fire crackling, but the bullets only hit the rubble walls behind. He squeezed through the distorted iron gate, rushed straight inside and started climbing the spiral staircase of the tower. The South Vietnamese soldiers chased to the foot of the tower, shouting loudly. They knew this was the only hiding place:

-North Vietnamese!! You think you can hide? Come out here!

Tri had reached the top floor of the bell tower. Looking down from here, the shadows of the South Vietnamese soldiers were lurking below, like animals locked in a cage. He breathed heavily, leaning against the cold stone pillar. That night was one of Tri's most terrifying. Looking through

the arched window of the tower, he saw the entire Quang Tri region like a burnt map. Every time a flare was fired from the enemy's side, a whole area was revealed: bomb craters as big as well mouths, leafless trees standing straight like dry bones. Below the tower, the shadows of the South Vietnamese soldiers were long, they sat scattered, occasionally swearing or firing a few random rounds into the air to show their power. What was scary was not only the four enemies waiting, but the absolute silence between the artillery rounds. Tri realized that the path up to the bell tower was just wide enough for one person to squeeze through. This was his advantage. The enemy knew this well. If they had ventured up one by one, Tri could have easily picked them off with his AK, turning the stairs into a death trap. So they chose to surround and wait, leaving Tri to endure the cold, loneliness, and hunger. In the middle of the quiet night, his stomach was growling, a feeling of frustration and fatigue from the long march.

As the sky was just getting dark, a thick fog covered La Vang. The enemy soldiers were shivering from the cold and seemed to have fallen asleep. Tri took the opportunity, tied a rope to the top of the tower and swung down to the hidden side, away from the main door. He quickly crawled across the dew-soaked grass, running to the old North Vietnamese military base - a poorly camouflaged earthen shelter. The bag of documents was found intact. Tri hurriedly stuffed it into his body. The feeling of safety had just begun to dawn when his stomach growled violently. He knew he can not return with an empty stomach. He decided to risk going to the only remaining civilian house on the edge of the forest.

Tri rushed straight into the dilapidated thatched house. The dim light inside was just enough for him to see a skinny grandma sitting huddled next to the dead fire. Without a greeting, hunger and pent-up tension made Tri act on instinct. He raised the AK-47, pointing the black barrel straight at the old woman's face. His voice was hoarse, each word full of menace:

-ANY RICE LEFT?

The old woman was like a dry leaf blown away, startled, her old eyes opened wide with fear looking at the muzzle of the gun. She stammered, trembling: "Yes... yes... sir North Vietnamese soldier... my family... my family is so poor, we have nothing left..." The old lady tried to crawl back, pointed to a corner of the house, then reached for a dark brown cloth bag. "We've been starving these past few days, we only have... only this left, sir...".

She opened the bag. Inside were a few remaining rice paper rolls, hardened. The old woman quickly took a chipped bowl, poured some cold water from a jar, and briefly soaked each rice paper in the water to

soften it. She held out her hand with a frightened look. Tri still held the gun cautiously but lowered the barrel, quickly snatching the wet rice paper rolls. He ate voraciously, the rustic taste of rice and cold water poured into his ravenous stomach that was like fire burning. His hunger was appeased, Tri nodded quickly, put the empty bowl back, turned around, and rushed straight out the door. He didn't have time to say thank you.

Tri had just run across an empty field upstream of Thach Han, trying to keep the bag of confidential documents close to his chest, when a buzzing sound quickly turned into a terrifying screech in the sky.

The enemy L-19 reconnaissance plane spotted him from afar. Immediately after, the roar of the A-37 Dragonfly jet, carrying out a sweeping mission. Tri was completely exposed in the treeless field. He was a single, unmistakable target. The difference between him and the enemy was too great: on one side was a skinny soldier, exhausted after a sleepless night; on the other was a metal death god swooping down with dizzying speed and devastating firepower.

Tri ran like crazy, but not straight. He had to constantly change direction, running in a Z shape to break the pilot's aiming trajectory. When he saw the flash from the plane's wings, signaling that bullets were being fired, he immediately jumped into a shallow drainage ditch by the roadside, clutching his bag of documents to his chest. The sound of the plane's gunfire was so loud it seemed to tear his eardrums, the bullets plowed right above his head. Rocks, dry mud and gunpowder smoke splashed all over him. The smell of gasoline, gunpowder and dust nearly suffocated him.

After the jet circled and sweeped three times, Tri knew he could not hold out much longer. He used his last bit of strength to crawl and launch himself into the dense bamboo grove at the end of the field, where the foliage could obscure the jet’s view. The jet circled a few more times and then flew away.

Tri lay in the bamboo grove, waiting until the sound of the jet had completely died down, giving way to the tense silence of the day. It took him a long time to regain his strength. His body ached, exhausted, his clothes were covered in mud and sweat. The bag of confidential documents, more precious than life itself, was still safely pressed against his chest.

He began his final journey – back to the Citadel. This was much more difficult, as he had to pass through the areas that had been most heavily shelled that day. Tri only dared to move as fast as he could, crouching low, weaving through trenches and bomb craters. Each distant explosion startled him, reminding him of the horror of fleeing the planes.

It was not until late evening, when the sunset reddened the horizon, that he reached the Thach Han River area again. This time, he chose a narrow stretch, waited in the darkness until he was sure there were no flares or patrols, then dove into the water. The river water was cold, but no longer as ferocious as when he had crossed it the first time.

Tri arrived at the 17B Battalion's trench in the most miserable state, his face dirty, his clothes torn, and almost completely exhausted. Hung was sitting cleaning his gun diligently, when he saw the ragged, mud-stained soldier staggering in, he stood up in surprise.

-Who's that!?

Tri whispered:

-It's...me...

Hung looked closely, then his eyes widened in surprise. He quickly ran to help Tri, almost unable to believe his eyes.

-Tri! It's you? Oh god, I kept thinking... - Hung choked, not daring to finish the sentence.

Commander Cuong rushed out from inside, his usually tough face now showing obvious worry.

-Tri! You're back? Where are the documents? Are the documents okay?!

Tri pulled his hand out of his shirt and took out the document bag wrapped in oilcloth, and handed it to Cuong. Cuong opened the bag with trembling hands and quickly checked it. After confirming that everything was intact, a big sigh of relief escaped his chest.

-Thank goodness! You did well! Mission accomplished! - Cuong almost shouted.

Cheers of joy quickly spread throughout the bunker. The entire battalion, soldiers who had been hardened by facing death, were now rejoicing as if they had just won a great victory. Binh ran over, though slower, but his eyes were filled with emotion:

-We were so scared! La Vang is an artillery nest!

The other soldiers patted Tri on the shoulder and hugged him. They knew that Tri’s alive return with the confidential documents had saved the entire operation. Cuong immediately ordered: “Quick! Take comrade Tri to bathe, change his clothes and give him a full meal! Then let him rest immediately. The Citadel owes comrade Tri a silent feat of arms!”.

Tri only had enough strength left to smile lightly. Despite being exhausted, seeing the joyful, grateful eyes of his teammates, he knew that all the risks and horrors he had gone through were worth it. The bag

of rice paper dipped in cold water had saved his life, and he had saved the entire battalion.

Chapter V. Sacrifice, Loss

The Citadel had entered its 50th day of the defensive battle. Along with the fire and bullets was the harshness of the rainy season, making hell even darker. The battlefield was no longer land but a swamp of mud, steel and corpses. The torrential rain turned the transportation trenches into cold, knee-deep canals. The soldiers' clothes were constantly wet, their feet swollen from soaking in the mud. The constant rain washed away all color, leaving only the gloomy gray of death. Everywhere were sections of ruined trenches, piled on top of each other were the bodies of teammates and enemies torn apart by artillery fragments, their flesh purple and bruised. The acrid smell of gunpowder, the smell of death, and the smell of rotting mud mixed together to create a deathly scent that could never be washed away. The rats were no longer afraid of people, they squirmed through the remaining pieces of flesh regardless of weather. Exhaustion had eaten into each soldier. The smiles had faded, only lifeless eyes remained. Cuong was extremely nervous. Hung was completely silent. In that damp and tragic hell, they could only cling to images of a life long gone. Tri often sat in a hidden corner of the trench, carefully removing Linh's jade hairpin to admire it. The jade green of the hairpin was now dirty and covered in mud, but it was the only proof of the promise he had to keep: to return. Binh occasionally opened a small notebook, looked at an old photo of him and his mother and little sister, his pale face showing a hint of gentleness. Hung, though silent, still kept the crumpled letter from his mother at home telling him to take care of his health.

One afternoon, intense artillery fire shook the Citadel. Ammunition was running out. Amidst the barrage of bullets, a precious RPG-7 ammunition box was dropped right at the edge of the trench.

"RPG ammunition crate! Someone... run up and get it!" - Cuong's voice roared.

Cuong himself rushed out of the trench. "Ammunition must be intact!" – he shouted.

Cuong reached for the ammunition box. At that moment, a submachine gun shot from the enemy base hit him straight in the chest. At the same time, a series of enemy 105mm mortars fell straight down. His blood spurted out, dyeing the mud red. Despite being hit by bullets, Cuong still used all his remaining strength to kick the ammunition box hard toward the trench. The explosion was earth-shattering. When the smoke and dust cleared, Cuong had fallen. A young soldier jumped up and was about to rush out of the trench. Tri growled: "Are you crazy? The enemy will shoot

you dead!" He pulled the soldier down. The soldier collapsed, covering his face and crying, his fingers scratching his mud-stained face. Tri, Binh and Hung crawled to Cuong's side in his final moments.

Binh trembled as he held the commander's cold hand, tears streaming down his face: "Cuong! You can't go! If you go, who will command us?".

Hung choked: "Brother... You should rest. Thank you for teaching us how to be soldiers...".

Tri tightened his grip on the hairpin, looking into Cuong's gradually cloudy eyes: "Don't worry, the Citadel... we will keep it. The ammunition crate you brought back saved us. Go back to the people, commander.".

Cuong smiled weakly, his eyes looked towards the Citadel, then passed away.

After a hasty burial of Cuong, an urgent meeting was called right in the trench. The entire battalion had only 9 men left. An old political commissar, his face full of pain but steadfast, declared:

-Commander Cuong has sacrificed heroically. The Citadel must have a commander. Based on his ability, courage, and recent achievements, the Command has decided to appoint comrade Tri as Leader of Battalion 17B, replacing comrade Cuong!

Tri was totally shocked. He stood up: "Commander! I... I'm a new soldier, I have no experience...".

The political commissar looked straight at Tri's eyes: "The greatest experience is that you returned from La Vang. The enemy fears your courage. Lead your teammates to hold their positions, that is an order!".

Tri turned to his two friends:

Binh smiled, his eyes full of admiration: "Cuong was right to choose you. You are the most worthy person, Tri.".

Hung patted Tri's shoulder, his voice hoarse: "Commander's order. Now you are my leader, Tri! I admire you. Don't die!".

Tri swallowed his tears. He had become Leader, shouldering not only the burden of combat but also the lives of his remaining teammates.

The next day, the enemy suddenly attacked. Binh and Hung supported each other in a corner of the trench. A-37 Dragonfly jet roared overhead. "Binh! Run fast!!" – Hung shouted.

Binh's slowness had become a death sentence. He tried to rush into the nearest shelter, but he was too late. A small bomb from the plane exploded right next to him. As the plane pulled away, the smoke gradually cleared. Tri and Hung crawled to their comrade. Tri fell to his knees, throwing his AK-47 to the ground. He collapsed on Binh's body,

letting out a bitter scream, the scream of a soldier who had lost his reason and his last support. Hung, his face stiff, covered Binh's wide eyes with his hand. He whispered, his voice hoarse: "Rest in peace, Binh. Here, I will bury you properly... so you won't have to become 'organic matter' for the rats anymore. I'm sorry, when we go home, we won't be a complete set anymore...".

Hung used his personal shovel, trembling as he dug the ground to bury his friend. Tri sat beside him, completely paralyzed, watching each shovel stroke, burying his sanity.

During the fighting at the new defensive line, Tri and Hung fought like lifeless corpses. Hung rushed forward to cover Tri. A dry sniper shot rang out. Hung collapsed. Blood flowed from a wound right in the middle of his forehead. Tri saw the shooter: a South Vietnamese officer with the rank Captain.

Tri turned to the side. He snatched the old Mosin Nagant from the hands of a young soldier. The other soldier looked bewildered. Tri pressed the barrel of the gun to his shoulder, suppressing all the pain and anger:

BAM!

The bullet hit the head of the South Vietnamese commander who had just shot Hung. He fell down on the rampart, blood splattered like tofu. The young soldier exclaimed in surprise: "This gun is very difficult to shoot! How could you...".

Tri did not say anything. He dropped the Mosin Nagant, his eyes empty. He turned and walked away. That precise shot was the last act of a soldier who had lost everything.

Tri, completely lost the will to fight, only the hairpin and heavy steps remained. At that moment, a frontline liaison ran up, handed Tri a piece of paper of an emergency order and said:

-The Paris Preliminary Agreement has been signed. We and the enemy will simultaneously cease fire and prepare to withdraw from key positions.

Tri stood still, looking at the piece of paper in his trembling hand. After all the sacrifices of Binh, Hung, and Cuong... finally, the Citadel was "liberated" not by a final attack, but by a word of peace.

Battalion 17B, now only Tri and a few other soldiers remained, received the order to retreat. Tri walked away, his face emotionless. He was the last one to return in accordance with the promise he had given to Linh.

Chapter VI. The Finale

Tri was the last soldier to leave the Citadel trenches, where the youth and lives of his closest teammates had been buried. The withdraw order was carried out in a cold silence. There was no sound of artillery, no

sound of gunfire, only the wet sound of boots wading through the cold grey mud of the rainy season.

Tri walked, the rank of Leader heavy on his shoulder, but his emotions were as empty as an empty shell. He no longer cried. His tears had dried up along with the lives of Binh and Hung. He was no longer the naive Science and Technology student, nor the agile, brave soldier of the past. He was a fragment of war, silently embracing an unnameable pain.

The green backpack on his shoulder felt light. But the heaviest thing was in his chest - where he kept Linh's jade hairpin. It was the last remnant of promise and hope.

They crossed Thach Han River once again. This time, it was eerily quiet, no longer the "steel waves" of bombs and bullets, only the muddy water, carrying away the corpses that had not yet decomposed and the debris of war. Tri looked down at the water, wondering if his father who had left in 1968 was also lying somewhere along with his teammates in this cold river.

Returning to the assembly unit in the north of Quang Tri, Tri was transferred to a resort camp. During the days waiting for a new order, he lived like a shadow. He did not want to talk, eat or drink. He just sat and looked into the distance, the fear of being startled had now turned into an obsession with loneliness.

One afternoon, the old political commissar approached Tri, carrying a letter from home and an old newspaper, saying sorrowfully:

-Tri. Your mother sent this letter. And you should read this.

Tri opened the letter with trembling hands. His mother wrote about her missing him, about Linh still waiting for him, and hoped he would bring news of his father. Then, he opened the newspaper. It was an article about the feats of arms in Quang Tri province. At the end of the article, there was a list of awards for soldiers who died in the battle:

Martyr: Nguyen Tuan Cuong - Battalion Commander - an example of sacrificing himself to protect ammunition...

Martyrs: Dang Duc Binh, Nguyen Viet Hung,... - Soldiers who died protecting the Citadel.

And he stopped at a name, his heart skipped a beat:

Martyr: Nguyen Trung Phuong[12] *- Deputy Commander of Division 302B - Heroically died in 1968 in Quang Tri township.*

Tri looked up at the political commissar: "Nguyen Trung Phuong... is that...".

The political commissar nodded sadly:

-That's your father. He left in 1968, and also lay right next to this battlefield. He was a brave soldier.

Tri was completely devastated. His father had died, right next to the battlefield where he had just fought. His father did not return, and he was left alone.

A few weeks later, Tri was discharged from the army with the rank of Major, the title of Third-Class Emulation Fighter, and a heartache that never healed.

He returned to the village.

The day Tri returned, his mother was waiting at the village gate. She did not recognize her son. Tri's face was gaunt, his eyes were deep and empty. He no longer had the bright smile of a Science and Technology student.

"Mom..." - Tri called softly.

His mother burst into tears, hugging him tightly. "Your father... did you find any news of your father?"

Tri tried to hold back his pain, telling the last lie: "I... I couldn't. Mom, I'm sorry...". He did not want his mother to suffer more because of the truth. He only showed her the letter his mother sent him during the war and Linh's hairpin. After visiting his mother, Tri went to Linh's house.

Linh opened the door. She was still pretty, but her eyes were filled with anxiety.

"Tri..." – She called his name, but with a trembling voice.

Tri did not hug her. He just stood still. He took out the hairpin, which he had wiped clean of the mud, and gave it back to her, saying in a soft voice that was no longer as affectionate as before:

-I'm back, Linh. I kept my promise.

Linh looked at the hairpin, then looked into his empty eyes. She understood that the person who returned was no longer the Tri of the past. He had left a part of his soul at the Citadel, with Binh and Hung.

She took his hand: "It's okay that you came back. Let's go home!"

Tri stood still. He knew that 81 fiery days and nights had turned him into a different person. He could not continue his old life, he could not smile, could not calculate the future, could not be as innocent as Hung and Binh. He had kept his promise to Linh, but he had failed with his promise to himself.

He just whispered: "I'm back, Linh... but I'm not the same Tri anymore."

Tri let go of her hand, turned away, his shadow stretched out on the sunlit village road. The war had ended, but the hell in the young soldier's heart had just begun...

Annotations

[1]: Trí

[2]: Bình

[3]: Hưng

[4]: Trần Sơn

[5]: Hùng

[6]: Nguyễn Tuấn Cường

[7]: Đặng Đức Bình

[8]: Nguyễn Trung Minh Trí

[9]: Nguyễn Việt Hưng

[10]: Hoàng Gia Minh

[11]: Ngô Bảo Khánh

[12]: Nguyễn Trung Phương

Translated by Dang Duc Binh

Written by Nguyen Trung Minh Tri

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